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Victimology in the Bondy Forest: the representation of the female victim in *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised*

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Abstract: This article proposes a victimological reading of the representation of the female victim in the Marquis de Sade's *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised* (1791). Rather than treating Justine merely as the passive object of a succession of abuses, the analysis examines the tension between individual conduct and the social, material, and educational conditions that shape and reproduce her vulnerability. The first part approaches the protagonist through the classical or positivist tradition of victimology, particularly the questions of victim responsibility, victim-proneness, and victim precipitation, in order to determine whether Justine's repeated exposure to known risks allows her conduct to enter the causal explanation of her successive misfortunes. The second part reassesses that reading through critical and feminist victimology, shifting attention from the victim's isolated choices to the structures within which those choices are formed and exercised. Particular emphasis is placed on poverty, dependence, lack of institutional protection, gender, and education. The article argues that Sade's narrative simultaneously permits an individual and a structural explanation of victimization: Justine acquires knowledge of risk and nevertheless maintains patterns of conduct that expose her to recurrent dangers, but those patterns cannot be separated from the material position and moral formation that delimit the range of actions she considers available.
Keywords: *Sade;* Justine*; victimology; victim responsibility; feminist victimology.*

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Introduction

Perhaps few authors have devoted themselves as obsessively and intensely to the problem of evil and crime as the Marquis de Sade. A kind of dirty and poorly kept secret of the Western canon, the Sadean legacy survives amid a paradox: on the one hand, his great fame (or, more precisely, his infamy) and his undeniable influence on artists, philosophers, and thinkers over the centuries; on the other, the repulsion provoked by the extreme content of his writings. The libertine novel, his specialty, was not invented by Sade, but none of his contemporaries matched the degree of aggressiveness reached by the author's pen in describing tortures and scenarios that challenge the limits of human imagination, as well as entire philosophical systems, more or less coherent, intended to justify them. For this reason, much of the discussion of Sade's work begins with the question of the value of these writings: why read something so terrible, obscene, and in bad taste, and what can be extracted from such a reading? The breadth and diversity of Sade's reception throughout the twentieth century, from the recovery promoted by Apollinaire to later philosophical and feminist readings, give a measure of the persistence of this question (Acosta Bustamante 8–10).

In 1955, Simone de Beauvoir asked whether it would be necessary to "burn Sade?", inaugurating a reading that paid particular attention to the relations among sexuality, freedom, and subjectivity in Sade's work (Acosta Bustamante 9). Georges Bataille, in several texts, especially in the essay included in *Literature and Evil*, argues that the nature of Sade's writings is fundamentally destructive; his presence, alongside Klossowski, Blanchot, and Paulhan, forms part of the philosophical renewal of the reading of Sade in the postwar period (Acosta Bustamante 8–9). Sade had asked that his manuscripts be destroyed after his death, and the entire mechanics of his novels is organized as a progressive escalation toward the annihilation of the victims, of ideas, of social structures, and, finally, of the author himself. Pierre Klossowski, in *Sade My Neighbor*, seeks to give meaning to Sade's chaotic philosophy through a Christian perspective, a reading whose theological dimension is highlighted by Lode Lauwaert (174–5). Angela Carter identifies proto-feminist ideas in the women who populate the author's imagination, whereas Andrea Dworkin considers Sade a pornographer who reproduces a scarcely innovative logic of violence and domination; the two authors occupied opposing positions in the feminist debate surrounding Sade's work (Acosta Bustamante 9–10). According to the correspondence of the Goncourt brothers, Gustave Flaubert was fascinated by Sade, a relationship that criticism has already examined specifically as a fascination with excess (Tondeur 75–84); the Surrealists nicknamed him the "Divine Marquis" (Acosta Bustamante 8); and Pier Paolo Pasolini gave him an anti-authoritarian dimension by recasting *The 120 Days of Sodom* in the context of fascism in *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Takayama 192–98). In *Khomeini, Sade and Me*, Abnousse Shalmani, in turn, claims the reading of Sade as a form of resistance and intellectual expansion, going so far as to state that she confronts Sade's imaginary violence in order to be able to confront forms of real violence (213). After all, "the world in which we now live," writes the playwright Yukio Mishima, "is a creation of the Marquis de Sade" (qtd. in Törnqvist 103).

It can therefore be observed that the question of why one should read Sade gives rise to

the most diverse answers. We do not intend to address it directly in this article, proceeding from the assumption that the relevance of the author's work has already been sufficiently demonstrated, including, and perhaps especially, for the fields of Criminal Law and Criminology. The reason seems evident: the "Divine Marquis" offers an extensive and detailed catalogue (we might call it exhaustive, were it not imprudent to underestimate the human capacity or creativity for evil) of the most varied forms of violation that one person can commit against another. More than graphically describing the tortures and abuses committed by his characters, Sade constructs a kind of 'inverted world', in which crime becomes natural, justifiable, and even desirable, while justice appears as a concept mobilized by hypocritical authorities to preserve their power and keep in ignorance the vulnerable people who still believe in it. One should not think, however, that this 'inverted world' constitutes a parallel reality. Through the insertion of real characters, such as Pope Pius VI in *History of Juliette*, and the occasional discussion of contemporary political questions, as occurs in the pamphlet *Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans* inserted in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, Sade presents himself, in most of his books (with the possible exception of *Aline and Valcour*), not as a utopian or dystopian, but as someone who intends to reveal the cruelty inherent in the reality of a world that already gravitates around crime.

This more structural dimension of Sade's treatment of criminality gave rise to significantly different positions on the part of two jurists: François Ost, author of *Sade and the Law*, and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, who wrote *Sade the Moralist: unveiling Sadean thought in light of eighteenth-century penal reform*. Published in the same year, 2005, both works seek to answer a central question: what would Sade's philosophy in relation to Law be, and what orientation could be attributed to his thought? Ost himself presents the two readings as directly divergent and takes Vilmer's interpretation as the starting point for his criticism (279–81).

Vilmer proposes a rereading of Sade as what we might characterize as an 'eccentric moralist'. Based on the context, indicated in the subtitle of his work, of the reform of the French Penal Code of 1791 and the debates on penal policy that ran through the Age of Enlightenment, led by figures such as Beccaria, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, the author maintains that Sade's work would perform a pedagogical function, and that the description of the most extreme and absurd crimes would aim to provoke in the reader repulsion toward such conduct. In the same way, the speeches of the characters who proclaim a "new libertine order" would function as a kind of "antithesis" to the "thesis" represented by the penal system then in force. The opposition between these two elements would lead, through a methodology that Vilmer characterizes as "Hegelian," to the advent of a "corrected order," close to Beccaria's theories (Ost 280–1).

Ost, in turn, refuses to assign Sade the position of a theorist of Criminal Law in the traditional sense, or to consider him an "apostle of the Enlightenment" committed to the realization of the common good. Instead, he explores his condition as philosopher and writer of fiction, capable of describing in an excessive manner a system that could contain his equally excessive imagination and that, above all, would serve his particular needs. Ost identifies in Sade a generalized, and at times vengeful, criticism of humanity and of institutions that would depart from Nature, regarded as the only possible legislator.

According to this interpretation, the basis of Sadean penal thought would lie in the belief in the absolute singularity of the individual. Consequently, every general or universal law would be, by definition, oppressive and, moreover, ineffective, because Law would not prevent each individual's particular tastes from continuing to exist and to be practiced, even if secretly. The state of perpetual war would thus be preferable to the social contract: in it, the individual could defend himself and oppress his neighbour, but would not have the weapons to confront the force of the State (292–5).

We understand Sade's writings to be excessively unstable and polyphonic, bringing together, in the same text, different functions, objectives, and types of language, so that one cannot sustain a single reading of his intentions or delimit an entirely uniform line of thought. Even so, we are closer to Ost's position than to that defended by Vilmer, especially because the latter considers the narrative sections of no interest when compared with the philosophical speeches delivered by the characters. This position presupposes a hierarchy: there would be more to learn about Law, traditionally associated with dense and austere doctrinal texts, in the passages of Sade's work whose language would be compatible with this conception, that is, in the explicit descriptions and demonstrations of systems constructed through syllogisms. The Law and Literature movement, which emerged in the United States in the 1970s, contests this assumption, however. Although the relations between Law and Literature have earlier antecedents, James Boyd White's *The Legal Imagination*, published in 1973, is generally identified as a landmark in the academic institutionalization of the field (Oliveira 396). Influenced by the pioneering work of Benjamin Nathan Cardozo, especially the article "Law and Literature," published in the Yale Review in 1925, scholars such as Richard Weisberg and Robin West and, in Europe, Peter Häberle, François Ost, and Denis Salas, among others, developed a field that considers literature a privileged space for exploring human nature, an object of particular interest to the jurist. Literature would also make it possible to understand the relations among the individual, society, and institutions through narratives that place these elements in conflict.

In the present article, I will seek to give this treatment to Sade's work, considering him less in his capacity as a libertine philosopher (although, evidently, this aspect cannot be neglected) and more in his condition as a novelist and author of works of fiction. We intend to approach his texts less as pretexts for the formulation of systems of thought and more as narratives in which certain types of characters and actions are represented, from which questions relevant to legal reflection can be extracted. We believe this path to be of particular interest to Criminology and, more specifically, to Victimology, since in *Justine* the "Divine Marquis" constructs a character whose trajectory calls into question the very elements through which the condition of victim is explained. Justine de Bertole becomes an orphan and is financially ruined in early adolescence. After leaving the convent of Panthemont, she begins her journey through the outside world with the purpose of preserving her virtue and finding honest means of subsistence. She is portrayed as naive, honest, and deeply attached to her convictions. Sade, however, subverts the fate normally reserved for a character of this nature. Justine is constantly punished for her purity, and her attachment to virtue becomes a recurring justification, used by the other characters to subject her to abuse.

The female victim constitutes a historically complex object for Criminology. It must first be recognized that the victim became an object of specific concern for the discipline only in a relatively recent period. In 1948, the German professor Hans von Hentig published the pioneering work *The Criminal and His Victim*, in which he sought to examine the relationship between criminal and victim from the understanding that the latter could constitute one of the factors involved in the occurrence of crime. The study of this dynamic would make it possible to identify potential victims on the basis of psychosociological aspects and contribute to crime prevention, recognizing, moreover, that the criminal himself could also be victimized (Van Dijk 1). The term 'victimology' was coined by the criminal lawyer Benjamin Mendelsohn, who used it in a presentation delivered in Bucharest in 1947 (Van Dijk 1). In 1956, Mendelsohn published "A New Branch of Biopsychosocial Science: Victimology", a text in which he broadened the discussion of the victim and of the very definition of the field; his typology based on different degrees of victim participation and culpability became one of the founding references of Victimology (Van Dijk 1–3; Sengstock 2–3). In later works, his conception would also move toward a 'general victimology', directed toward the prevention of victimization and assistance to victims (Van Dijk 3). The initial attention given to the victim's participation in the genesis of crime, however, would generate intense controversy, especially from the 1970s onward, under the influence of feminist criticism. Concepts such as victim precipitation were questioned for their potential to convert the analysis of crime dynamics into the blaming of the victim, especially in studies of rape and violence against women; feminist criticism would also shift attention toward the structural inequalities of power present in these experiences (Van Dijk 3).

It can thus be seen that, when female objects of study are involved, the victimological branch of Criminology raises several questions of an epistemological nature: how and why does a woman become a victim? In what way should this phenomenon be studied, to what extent, and with what objectives? We understand that the story of Justine, a victim par excellence and, at the same time, a radical subversion of narratives normally associated with the reward of virtue, can offer relevant perspectives for confronting these questions. To this end, the Law and Literature method will be adopted as a paradigm, understood as the extraction, from the narrative text, of elements pertinent to the discussion of the problem examined, in this case, the representation and study of women in Victimology. In the conventional classification of the relations between the two fields, this approach is situated predominantly within what is called 'law in literature', directed toward the identification and analysis of representations of legal elements in literary works (Oliveira 397).

The analysis of *Justine* will be developed in two stages. First, we will examine the extent to which her conduct becomes part of the explanation for the repetition of her misfortunes, in an approximation with classical victimology (1). Next, this reading will be relativized from critical and feminist perspectives, considering the social, material, and educational conditions that produce and reproduce her vulnerability (2).

1. The perfect victim? A reading through the lens of classical victimology

Before analysing Justine de Bertole, the character, it is necessary to establish which

Justine we are discussing. After all, Sade created three versions of her story. The first, *The Misfortunes of Virtue*, was written in 1787, during his imprisonment in the Bastille, in the relatively brief form of a conte philosophique. Four years later, the text was considerably expanded in *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised*, published in 1791. Finally, *The New Justine*, published in 1797, transformed the narrative once again, this time on a much larger scale. John Phillips summarizes this process as the passage from a novella of approximately one hundred pages to a two-hundred-page novel and, finally, to a narrative of more than one thousand pages. Each version is therefore larger than the previous one; the 1791 version is more violent and sexually explicit than the 1787 tale, while the 1797 version takes this tendency much further (xvii–xviii).

There is, however, another difference that is of more direct interest to the present study. Both in *The Misfortunes of Virtue* and in *Justine, or Good Conduct Well Chastised*, it is Justine herself who narrates most of her misadventures; in *The New Justine*, she loses this position to a third-person narrator. The transformation produces quite practical consequences. In the 1791 version, events must pass through the protagonist's perspective, vocabulary, and modesty, an inexperienced young woman who frequently avoids naming directly what happens to her. McMorran draws attention precisely to this tension between the narrator's modesty and what the author intends to reveal, observing that the passage to *The New Justine* anticipates the loss of her voice and alters the possibilities for representing the same narrative material (374–5). Phillips reaches a similar conclusion when he observes that, in 1791, the violence is narrated by Justine herself and therefore by a sexually inexperienced and religious voice, which limits obscenity at the linguistic level (xix). We have therefore chosen the 1791 *Justine*. Methodologically, the first person makes it possible to consider not only what happens to the character, but also the way in which she herself interprets what she experiences, following this process without the protagonist disappearing behind the catalogue of torments that, especially in *The New Justine*, tends to occupy the foreground.

This is important because it highlights that Justine's apparent naivete does not correspond to a general incapacity for reasoning. Throughout the novel, she argues, identifies dangers, formulates judgments about her interlocutors and, at times, retrospectively recognizes that she should have acted differently. The problem is that this knowledge rarely produces a lasting transformation of her conduct. It is precisely this combination of increasing experience and the permanence of the same principles that makes it possible to treat Justine as a kind of anti-Bildungsroman. The protagonist receives successive lessons about how the world works, frequently accompanied by quite convincing practical demonstrations, but refuses to incorporate the fundamental conclusion that her libertine teachers attempt to impose: if the world works in this way, she too should work in this way.

It is at this point that the character acquires particular interest for victimology. At first, Justine seems almost to be an experiment designed to eliminate any doubt about the innocence of the victim. Young, orphaned, without fortune, she seeks to survive without committing crimes, avoids taking advantage of the people she meets, refuses proposals she considers dishonest, and helps strangers when she believes they are in danger. And yet, it is precisely from these actions that her misfortunes accumulate. The title of the work

already contains this tension. Phillips observes that, while 'infortunes' ('misfortunes') suggests a misfortune that befalls virtue through no fault of its own, 'malheurs' ('woes') introduces greater ambiguity; in the second version, the juxtaposition between Justine and the 'malheurs de la vertu' ('misfortunes of virtue') concentrates attention on the character herself as a source, at least to some extent, of her misfortunes (xx). The question that runs through this section can therefore be formulated directly: does Sade construct Justine as a victim guilty of her own misfortune?

The question has a curiously close correspondence with one of the founding problems of victimology. What Mawby and Walklate call positivist victimology, an expression I will use to designate, in a broad sense, the first or 'classical' victimological tradition, was characterized precisely by the attempt to identify factors related to non-random patterns of victimization and, among them, the possible contribution of the victim herself to the event that victimizes her (9). The shift was important: crime ceased to be observed exclusively as the unilateral action of a criminal upon an absolutely passive subject, and the relationship established between the two also began to be examined. Hans von Hentig and Benjamin Mendelsohn occupy a central position in this first moment. Mawby and Walklate identify both as founders of victimology and observe that their typologies sought to understand the relationship between victim and offender from different perspectives. Von Hentig focused on what he called victim-proneness, constructing categories of people who would present particular vulnerabilities to victimization; among them, the young, the elderly, and women. Mendelsohn, in turn, organized his classification according to the degree of culpability attributed to the victim, from the victim considered completely innocent to the victim considered more culpable (12).

In Mary Sengstock's reconstruction of Mendelsohn's typology, six categories appear: the completely innocent victim; the victim of lesser culpability, frequently victimized through ignorance; the voluntary victim, whose culpability would be equivalent to that of the offender; the victim more culpable than the offender, by provoking or inducing the act; the victim who would be the only one culpable; and, finally, the imaginary victim, who falsely accuses someone of a non-existent event (2). What is most interesting for my analysis does not lie precisely in the examples used to fill each category, but in the logic of the continuum. 'Victim' and 'responsible' do not appear as necessarily incompatible concepts. A person can be effectively victimized and, simultaneously, possess some degree of participation in the genesis of the situation that culminated in the crime. It is important to distinguish this reasoning from another concept later developed within the same first tradition: victim precipitation. Marvin Wolfgang used the expression in his study of homicides to designate situations in which the victim has a positive and direct participation in precipitating the episode. In his definition, developed from homicide cases, the precipitating victim is the one who plays an active role in triggering the confrontation, with particular relevance given to the person who first uses physical force or displays a weapon (2).

Justine does not, as a rule, correspond to this hypothesis. In the account of her misfortunes, she is never the one who initiates the violence or provokes her aggressors. Her approximation with classical victimology lies in another question: in the broader question of the victim's participation in the genesis and, above all, in the repetition of her

victimization. At the beginning of the novel, Justine seems to occupy without difficulty the extreme of the completely innocent victim. The narrative frame itself prepares this reading. When she appears before Madame de Lorsange (later revealed to be her sister Juliette) and Corville, Justine is tied up and is being taken to answer for homicide, theft, and arson. The guards themselves, however, show reluctance in the face of the accusation, describing her as the gentlest and most honest person they had transported. Sade thus presents, simultaneously, the legal signs of guilt and the narrative signs of innocence: the woman whom institutions treat as a criminal is offered to the reader, even before her story begins, as a figure whose appearance and behaviour arouse suspicion of a miscarriage of justice (Sade 469–70).

The first episodes confirm this construction. Upon leaving the convent and seeking means of subsistence, Justine is sent by her hostess, Madame Desroches, to the wealthy Dubourg. The objective is perfectly ordinary: to obtain employment or assistance. Dubourg, however, turns the young woman's economic need into a sexual proposition. His argument is significant because it anticipates the logic that will run through the entire novel. He asks by what right Justine expects to be assisted by the rich if she offers them nothing in return and explains that, for a young woman like her, the only possible usefulness consists precisely in what her chastity prevents her from granting. When Justine refuses, he tries to obtain by force what she does not wish to give voluntarily (Sade 471–3). In this first encounter, it is difficult to construct any relation between the victim's conduct and the aggressor's act that is not entirely produced by Dubourg. Justine seeks work, agrees to perform all services compatible with her age and with what she considers decent and, faced with a demand she does not accept, tries to leave. The refusal itself is converted by the man into a justification for violence. In terms close to the initial pole of Mendelsohn's typology, she is the victim whose contribution to the event appears non-existent.

More interesting is Desroches's reaction. Justine returns to the lodging expecting the woman to share her indignation, but receives an entirely different interpretation. Desroches reprimands her and states that Dubourg had been "too good" to let her leave without having been satisfied; in his position, she says, she would not allow Justine to leave the house before giving him what he wanted. She then orders her to return to the financier, satisfy him, and bring the money necessary to pay for the lodging. What Justine presents as aggression is reinterpreted by another character as a failure of calculation on the part of the victim herself: a poor young woman should understand the implicit transaction in the help offered by rich men (Sade 473–5). This discourse is important because the attribution of responsibility to the victim appears in the novel even before Justine has enough experience to be genuinely held responsible for her naivete. Desroches does not claim that Dubourg did not attempt to rape her; the fact itself is not really disputed. What she disputes is the reasonableness of the resistance. Justine's position is thus transformed from innocent victim into an imprudent victim according to the logic of the people who inhabit that universe: if she needs resources and the man who possesses them has already revealed the conditions under which he is willing to provide them, insisting on chastity would be the decision that produces her own misery.

Sade repeats this mechanism in progressively more complex situations. After leaving Desroches's house, Justine enters the service of Du Harpin, a usurer who initially exalts

probity as the principal virtue of his household. Some time later, however, he proposes that she take part in a theft. The proposal is not presented directly. As will be recurrent in the novel, it is preceded by a speech intended to demonstrate the rationality of the criminal act. Du Harpin presents theft as a response to the inequality of wealth, seeks to relativize the moral prohibition, and gives Justine the instruments necessary for the operation. She refuses (Sade 478–9). The result is precisely the opposite of what a conventional logic of rewarding virtue would allow one to expect. Du Harpin pretends that he made the proposal only to test her honesty, waits some time and then arrives at the room accompanied by a commissioner and soldiers. He accuses Justine of having stolen a diamond worth one thousand crowns; the object, placed among the young woman's belongings, is found. The same man who tried to turn her into an accomplice makes her refusal the basis for destroying her. Justine is arrested and later sentenced to death (Sade 479–80).

The scene is especially interesting from a victimological point of view because the text itself makes Justine retrospectively recognize the relationship between her behaviour and the risk. She realizes that responding so firmly had been dangerous: once a criminal reveals his plan, she explains, the person who refuses to become an accomplice runs the risk of becoming an enemy. She then admits that, “with a little more experience,” she would have left the house immediately (Sade 479). The narrator herself identifies a decision that, had it been different, would probably have interrupted the causal chain that ends in her imprisonment. This does not make her responsible for Du Harpin’s crime. The diamond is still planted by him; the accusation remains false; the agents continue to prevent her from defending herself adequately. But for the first time an important distinction appears between responsibility for the criminal act and participation in exposure to a situation of risk. It is exactly in this second sense that positivist victimology sought to examine the victim’s contribution. The question is not whether Justine stole the diamond, but whether certain earlier decisions contributed to placing her in a situation in which Du Harpin could incriminate her.

From that point onward, the analysis of an isolated episode and the analysis of the narrative as a whole begin to produce different answers. In each event considered separately, Justine remains close to the completely innocent victim. Yet the greater the number of experiences accumulated, the more difficult it becomes to explain her future decisions exclusively by inexperience. The character progressively knows more about the world in which she finds herself; she learns that a rich man may condition assistance on sexual availability, that an apparently respectable employer may try to turn her into an accomplice, that refusal may generate retaliation, and that institutions will not necessarily correct the inequality existing between her word and that of a socially more powerful person. The question becomes what she does with this knowledge.

The judicial episode following Du Harpin’s accusation deepens yet another dimension of the problem. Justine does not explain her conviction only by the usurer's skill. She states that the case of a person who possesses neither influence nor protection is quickly decided in a country in which virtue is considered incompatible with misery and misfortune itself functions as evidence against the accused (Sade 479–80). This passage will be fundamental in the following section, because it introduces an explanation that no longer depends only on the victim's individual conduct: her economic position and her inability to mobilize

institutional protection participate in the outcome. For the moment, however, what matters is to perceive that the novel preserves both explanations simultaneously. Justine should have left the house; at the same time, when Du Harpin accuses her, the inequality of resources between them makes her defence extremely difficult.

The altercation involving the character Saint-Florent radicalizes the first dimension. Justine meets the merchant when the bandit Coeur-de-fer and his gang are preparing to kill him. She intercedes for him, invents a family relationship to save his life, and later takes advantage of the criminals' sleep to return his wallet and escape in his company. Once safe, she even offers him part of the little money she possesses, while asking only that he help her find an honest position. Saint-Florent initially maintains an appearance of respect and gratitude, even allowing Justine to occupy a separate room during the night. She comes to trust him (Sade 498–501). In the forest, Saint-Florent strikes her on the head until she loses consciousness, commits sexual violence, and steals her purse. Upon awakening, Justine herself formulates the causal irony of the scene: that was the reward for everything she had just done for the man whose life and fortune she had saved (Sade 502–3). If there were an episode designed to produce a victim entirely dissociated from any provocation of the aggressor, it would be difficult to construct a clearer example. Justine not only refrains from harming Saint-Florent but directly produces an extraordinary benefit for him. The aggression deliberately breaks any conventional correspondence between the victim's conduct and what she receives in return.

Viewed in this way, Dubourg, Du Harpin, and Saint-Florent seem to demonstrate exactly the opposite of the early theories of victim responsibility. Justine does not directly precipitate the crimes. She refuses, helps, works, trusts, or seeks protection. In each of these episodes, the immediate cause of the violence lies in the decision of the person who commits it. This conclusion changes partially, however, when we stop asking why that crime occurred and ask why Justine continues to be victimized. Repetition transforms the object of investigation. It is here that her story approaches more productively the problem posed by positivist victimology. Mawby and Walklate summarize this tradition by its concern with finding factors related to non-random patterns of victimization and victims who may have contributed to their own victimization (9). In *Justine*, the pattern becomes increasingly less random. The protagonist does not deliberately seek out her tormentors, but insists on organizing her conduct according to assumptions that previous experiences show to be unreliable within that universe: she expects recognition of charity, some degree of reciprocity, the reasonable functioning of institutions, limits derived from religion or morality, and the possibility of persuading people who have already declared that they recognize none of these limits.

The libertines perceive this before she does and, almost obsessively, try to turn each encounter into a lesson. The repetitive structure of Sade's major novels (philosophical discourse followed or accompanied by a sexual, violent, or criminal demonstration) acquires a particular function in Justine. The speeches present rules about how the world works, and the events that follow frequently seem to confirm, within the narrative economy, the practical effectiveness of those rules. Phillips observes precisely the alternation, in the 1791 version, between scenes of abuse and long philosophical discussions (xviii–xix). Du Harpin defends the usefulness of theft and remains unpunished while Justine, who rejects

it, is convicted as a thief. Coeur-de-fer presents force as sufficient argument because the group materially possesses the young woman; when she asks why she should submit, he answers, in essence, that they have her in their power and that the reason of the strongest prevails (Sade 487). What Justine considers moral objections, the libertines treat as errors of diagnosis. The world, they insist, has already demonstrated its rules to her; continuing to expect it to function differently would be her responsibility.

It is in this sense that the work approaches an anti-Bildungsroman. Justine's experience increases, but her transformation remains limited. She learns facts without accepting the normative lesson that her interlocutors draw from them. She knows that Du Harpin was dangerous, but does not conclude from this that she should accept crime; she knows that Saint-Florent destroyed the possibility of a necessary correspondence between gratitude and benefit, but she continues to practice acts of charity; she knows that institutions can convict the innocent, but does not abandon the idea of justice; she understands what the libertines tell her, but continues to reject the premise that survival requires becoming like them. Thus, the first answer to the question of this section must be affirmative only in a very specific sense. Sade progressively constructs Justine as someone who participates in the reproduction of the conditions of her own victimization. Not because she provokes the crimes in Wolfgang's technical sense, much less because she is the author of what is done to her, but because repetition allows initial ignorance to become knowledge of risk. The young woman who seeks Dubourg for the first time does not know what she will find; the woman who has already known Dubourg, Du Harpin, Coeur-de-fer, and Saint-Florent possesses a much greater amount of information about what may happen.

The most appropriate approximation is therefore not with victim precipitation in the strict sense, but with the broader question of the early victimological typologies concerning the victim's contribution to the genesis of victimization. Mendelsohn constructs a continuum in which only one of the categories corresponds to the entirely innocent victim and the others introduce different degrees of participation or culpability (Sengstock 2–3). Justine cannot simply be transported into one of these categories as though the novel were a contemporary case study; what matters is that Sade narratively constructs the same problem. The more experience she acquires, the more her tormentors can claim that she should know better (see, e.g., Sade 487–90). There is, therefore, a kind of progressive victimological attribution of responsibility within the novel. The first misadventure does not depend on any prior learning; the tenth already occurs after nine experiences. The difference is decisive. What began as a radical break between merit and result, virtue producing suffering instead of reward, begins to acquire another causality: if Justine knows the world and persists in behaving as though it obeyed the rules in which she believes, her principles begin to function, in libertine logic, as predictable factors of her vulnerability.

At this first level, Sade seems surprisingly close to what positivist victimology would do much later: shift part of the attention from the aggressor to the victim and ask whether her characteristics, decisions, or behaviours have some place in the explanation of the occurrence or repetition of the event. The author constructs a character who, although she does not technically precipitate the crimes she suffers, progressively begins to participate in the reproduction of the situations in which her vulnerability can be exploited. The correlation between victim conduct and victimization, broken in the first episodes, is

reconstructed at another level. Justine does not deserve what happens to her, an expression that is not even necessary for the analysis; but, within the causal logic sustained by her interlocutors, she continues to act in ways that make her exposure to new risks predictable, even after knowing those risks.

It is here, however, that a reading based exclusively on the victim's individual participation begins to reveal its limits. The reasoning assumes that Justine's principles are merely strategic choices that she could abandon after observing their limited effectiveness. The novel itself suggests something more complex. When the libertines ask why she believes what she believes, the answer repeatedly leads to a formation prior to the experiences narrated. If Justine's conduct contributes to reproducing her vulnerability, it remains to ask where that conduct came from. The victimological question then shifts from what the victim does to what contributed to forming the victim who acts in this way.

2. The road to Hell, paved with good intentions: vulnerability and the reproduction of victimization from a critical and feminist perspective

If the first part of the analysis made it possible to bring Justine closer to the classical concern with the victim's contribution to her own victimization, a second reading introduces a problem that this perspective, taken in isolation, cannot resolve. To say that the protagonist continues to make dangerous decisions even after acquiring sufficient experience to identify certain risks describes a regularity; it does not explain, however, where the repertoire of conduct that she continues to reproduce comes from. This is precisely one of the criticisms formulated by Mawby and Walklate of the typologies of positivist victimology. According to the authors, the classification of victims can offer an image of the regularities of victimization, but tends to present a static conception of society and encounters difficulty in understanding the social and historical reproduction of victimization itself across time and space (12). In other words: identifying that young people, the elderly, or women appear as vulnerable groups is different from explaining the social processes that produce and reproduce this vulnerability.

Applied to Justine, the contrast is particularly productive. The first perspective asks: which behaviours of the protagonist increase her exposure to risk? She trusts, helps, refuses certain forms of self-protection, remains in some situations after perceiving signs of danger, and preserves principles whose practical ineffectiveness has repeatedly been demonstrated to her. The second question is prior: why does Justine possess this set of behaviours, and why do some alternatives continue to seem possible to her while others are morally inconceivable?

Sade offers an answer from the first episodes. When Dubourg tries to subdue her, Justine states that she would rather die than violate "the principles she received in childhood" (Sade 474). The formulation matters. Her morality does not appear as the result of a conclusion produced after empirically examining how the world works. They are received principles, prior to the experience we are following and incorporated into what the character understands to be her own identity. Coeur-de-fer makes the pedagogical dimension even more explicit. After Justine reproduces religious and moral arguments to condemn certain practices, he does not merely disagree. He asks, "who ever told you such a thing?" and then

adds, “let me proceed to rectify your ideas” (Sade 490). The sentence may seem incidental amid one of the novel’s numerous libertine speeches, but it reaches exactly a question that is relevant to the analysis. Coeur-de-fer identifies the young woman’s virtue not as nature, but as education. She thinks in that way because someone taught her to think in that way.

Justine’s story can then be observed as the conflict between two pedagogies. There is a first formation, received before the beginning of the narrative, that associates correct conduct with chastity, honesty, charity, trust in Providence, respect for moral prohibitions, and the expectation that unjust suffering does not destroy the value of virtue. Then there is a second education, administered by the libertines she encounters. Dubourg, Du Harpin, Dubois, Coeur-de-fer, and the other characters are not content merely to act against Justine's values; they explain to her at length why these values would be false and try to produce in her another way of interpreting human relations. Justine’s peculiarity lies in the failure of this re-education. She learns the content of the lessons, but refuses conversion. It is possible to alter her knowledge of the world; it is much more difficult to alter what she understands to be admissible conduct within it. For this reason, her inability to learn should not be confused with an intellectual incapacity. Justine is capable of perceiving, after Du Harpin, that a more experienced person would have left the house. She is capable of recognizing that perhaps she should not continue to justify men after everything she has seen. She is capable of describing the inequality that exists between a person without influence or protection and her accusers. Learning occurs. What does not occur is the replacement of her moral structure by the libertine structure.

This distinction significantly alters the question of victim responsibility. If Justine knows that certain behaviours increase risk, it is possible, from the perspective of the previous section, to recognize some participation of her agency in the repetition of the misfortunes. But asking why she continues to choose in this way shifts the problem from the isolated individual to the conditions that formed that individual. The decision continues to exist, but it acquires a history. And this logic permits an analytical approximation between Sade’s narrative and what critical victimology would formulate much later. Mawby and Walklate maintain that a critical victimology must go beyond the simple observation of visible events to examine also the mechanisms that produce the conditions in which subjects act. In their formulation, one must consider both people’s conscious activity and their routine practices, the generative mechanisms of situations, and the intended or unintended consequences of these actions (19). The authors perhaps synthesize the most important notion for the reading of Justine: the need to consider the recursive relationship between agency and structure, situating it within historical and cultural processes and within a broader socioeconomic framework (20).

Justine possesses agency. She refuses Dubourg; refuses Du Harpin; saves Saint-Florent; decides to remain faithful to what she believes; repeatedly chooses not to adhere to the morality of the libertines. But this agency is exercised within circumstances that were not created by her. She enters the outside world orphaned and without fortune; needs to find work and lodging; depends on economically more powerful people; has little capacity for institutional protection; and was educated in such a way as to consider morally unavailable several strategies that the characters around her employ without any hesitation. The Du Harpin episode demonstrates how these dimensions overlap. Justine could indeed have left

the house after the proposal of theft; the character herself recognizes this. At the same time, when the usurer decides to incriminate her, she explains the result by the structural position she occupies: she is a poor woman, without influence or protection, facing the accusation of someone who possesses both. The false material evidence is immediately considered sufficient, and she cannot even have her version heard before being taken to prison (Sade 479–80).

The same applies to Dubourg. The protagonist could, as Desroches advises, accept the proposal and obtain resources. This alternative exists materially; therefore, it cannot be said that Justine is incapable of choosing. The problem is that the formation she received converts this option into something she considers worse than misery itself. When she states that she would rather die than transgress the principles received in childhood, she demonstrates that the decision is not calculated only in terms of immediate utility (Sade 474). What appears irrational to Desroches is perfectly coherent within the moral system that formed Justine. Thus, what in the first section appeared as imprudence can be reconsidered. The conduct for which the victim begins to be held responsible did not arise spontaneously in her. It is the product of a socialization that taught her which attitudes correspond to the virtuous woman and which limits cannot be crossed even in the face of necessity. If these same behaviours function as factors of vulnerability in the universe represented by Sade, the supposed individual predisposition to victimization begins to have a social origin.

The difference in relation to positivist victimology appears with particular clarity when the category ‘women’ is considered. Von Hentig’s typology included ‘the female’ among the groups characterized by greater victim-proneness (Mawby and Walklate 12). The classification records an association between a given condition and vulnerability. The critical question is different: what is there in the organization of social relations that causes that condition to be capable of becoming vulnerability? It is this second question that makes it possible to move from a characteristic attributed to the victim to the circumstances in which she lives. The feminist critique of victimology developed this problem with particular intensity. Mawby and Walklate observe that concepts such as victim precipitation came to be viewed with hostility by feminist criticism because they could function as mechanisms of victim blaming and, above all, because their concentration on the victim’s individual behaviour could conceal the presence of patriarchal structures in women’s experiences (10). It was not simply a matter of replacing the proposition ‘the victim participates’ with the opposite proposition ‘the victim never possesses agency’, but of contesting a form of explanation that examined individual behaviour without examining with equal attention the conditions in which that behaviour was produced.

This perspective is especially useful for Justine because the novel does not allow her vulnerability to be explained simply by the fact that she is a woman. There are other women in the same narrative universe who do not occupy the position of passive victims. Desroches participates in the exploitation of the protagonist, while Dubois incorporates crime as a means of survival. If female characters can occupy such different positions within the same universe, Justine's vulnerability must be explained by something more specific. It is the combination of youth, poverty, dependence, absence of protection and, principally, formation that begins to distinguish her trajectory. This last element is decisive

because what, in the first section, appeared as stubbornness or inability to learn has an earlier history. When Justine argues with Coeur-de-fer and resorts to the moral and religious notions she knows to condemn what he proposes, the bandit does not respond merely with another argument: he directly asks, "who ever told you such a thing?" and then adds, "let me proceed to rectify your ideas" (Sade 490). The question reaches exactly the problem that interests us. For Coeur-de-fer, Justine was not born thinking in that way. Someone instructed her that way.

From that point onward, the character's vulnerability can be understood not only as an individual characteristic, but as the result of a process of socialization. Justine learned to attribute value to chastity, honesty, charity, religion, and the refusal of certain means for achieving her objectives. These principles are not simple abstract opinions; they concretely delimit the repertoire of actions that she considers available when she finds herself under pressure. What the libertines intend to modify, therefore, is not only her opinion about a particular practice, but the system that allows the protagonist to distinguish what she can from what she cannot do. Education acquires, in this sense, a function directly related to the reproduction of victimization. Honesty prevents her from using means freely employed by Du Harpin; charity causes her to risk her own safety on behalf of Saint-Florent; the preservation of chastity causes her to refuse the economic solution presented by Dubourg and Desroches; trust in certain values of justice does not necessarily find correspondence in the institutions that judge her. Justine's principles restrict the means she accepts using before people who recognize no equivalent restrictions. This asymmetry transforms education into a victimological problem. The norm is internalized: it is not necessary for an authority to be constantly forcing Justine to be honest, chaste, or charitable. She herself reproduces the learned system, including when she could obtain an immediate advantage by transgressing it. Consequently, what an analysis centred on the moment of the crime describes as 'victim behaviour' can be traced back to a prior process of formation. The apparent predisposition ceases necessarily to be natural or strictly psychological and begins to possess a social genealogy.

This question does not appear in isolation in Justine. Education occupies a recurrent position in the construction of Sadean characters, and it is particularly revealing that Sade returns to the problem when he writes about the formation of other young women. Marco Menin notes that this pedagogical intention is already visible in the subtitles of some works, notably *Philosophy in the Boudoir* ('or The Immoral Mentors'). According to the author, the text functions as a true Bildungsroman, in which the young Eugénie is formed by her 'immoral mentors', charged with demonstrating the falsity of the religious education she had received from her mother and replacing it with another system of ideas and dispositions (1). The comparison with Justine is instructive. In both texts, a young woman encounters characters who intend to reform what she had previously learned. The fundamental difference lies in the result. Eugénie de Mistival accepts the pedagogy to which she is subjected; Justine resists. The libertines in Justine perform a function similar to that explicitly attributed to the 'immoral mentors' of *Philosophy in the Boudoir*: they seek to replace the young woman's religious and moral formation with another way of interpreting nature, pleasure, interest, and human relations. What makes *Justine* an anti-Bildungsroman is precisely the failure of this process. She listens to the lessons, understands part of them,

and continues to return to her earlier education.

The recurrence of the problem becomes even clearer in *Eugénie de Franval: A Tragic Tale*. Menin draws attention to the fact that the protagonist is educated by her father from birth according to principles deliberately contrary to the religion and morality that he intends to reject; her entire education thus participates in the construction of the system through which the character will come to interpret her actions (7). Once again, Sade does not simply present an adult woman endowed with finished moral characteristics: he follows or describes a process through which these characteristics are produced. Placing Justine, Eugénie de Mistival, and Eugénie de Franval side by side therefore reveals a persistent concern with the pedagogical production of female subjectivity. In *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, an earlier education is deliberately dismantled by new teachers; in *Eugénie de Franval: A Tragic Tale*, formation is controlled by the father from childhood; in Justine, the education received before the protagonist's full entry into the outside world resists an almost endless sequence of attempts at re-education. The contents of these pedagogies are different, as are the destinies of the characters, but the narrative mechanism is similar: what a woman becomes depends, in part, on what she was taught to consider true, natural, permitted, or forbidden.

We can then return to the question posed in the first section. Does Sade construct Justine as guilty of her own misfortune? At a first level, the answer is partially affirmative. The repetitive structure of the novel causes the protagonist to accumulate experience and continue, despite it, to make decisions that expose her again to known dangers. In this respect, her trajectory can be brought closer to the concerns of positivist victimology with the victim's contribution to her own victimization: Justine does not provoke the crimes in Wolfgang's technical sense, but her conduct becomes part of the explanation for the recurrence of the situations in which she is victimized. The narrative itself, however, prevents this answer from being sufficient. Justine does not enter each episode as an abstract individual, endowed with unlimited freedom to choose among every imaginable response. It is at this second level that the approximation with critical and feminist victimology acquires meaning. Vulnerability ceases to be treated only as an attribute of the victim and comes to be related to the conditions that produce and reproduce it. Justine participates in some of the situations that expose her to risk, but the form of her participation is conditioned by a material position and an education prior to the event itself. Victimology therefore can no longer be thought of in isolation from structure.

Conclusion

Reading *Justine* through Victimology makes it possible to perceive that the figure of the female victim constructed by Sade is reducible neither to the model of absolute passivity, in which every explanation of the crime is exhausted by the aggressor's will, nor to the opposite conception, according to which certain behaviours of the victim would be sufficient to explain the repetition of the situations in which she suffers violence. Justine lacks the forms of social and institutional protection available to many of those who violate, exploit, or accuse her; at the same time, she is not a character entirely deprived of decision-making capacity. She observes, argues, recognizes dangers, learns from some experiences

and, even so, continues to guide her conduct by principles that were transmitted to her before the beginning of her trajectory. The female vulnerability represented in the novel thus appears less as the consequence of an isolated characteristic (sex, naivete, poverty, or imprudence) than as the result of the combination of social position, material dependence, moral formation, and the concrete exercise of agency.

This finding also prevents the question of victim responsibility from being answered by a simple choice between blame and innocence. If Justine participates, at some moments, in the reproduction of the conditions in which her vulnerability can again be exploited, this does not mean that she produces the crimes she suffers or that her conduct can be separated from the conditions that made it possible. The insistence on charity, honesty, chastity, or trust in certain forms of justice may appear, retrospectively, poorly adapted to the universe in which the character moves; these behaviours, however, do not arise in a vacuum, but belong to an education that delimits what she considers possible, acceptable, or intolerable. The female victim who emerges from Justine is therefore not a static figure to be located in a prior category, but a character whose condition is formed over the course of a continuous relationship among experience, choices, material limitations, and processes of socialization.

It is also for this reason that the approach proposed by Law and Literature proves particularly suited to the problem. A victimological classification can distinguish degrees of victim participation, identify factors of vulnerability, or describe relations between agency and structure; literary narrative, however, makes it possible to observe these elements in motion, following the succession of events, the character's transformation or resistance to transformation, and the way in which she herself interprets what happens to her. The legal and criminological interest of Justine does not depend, therefore, on attributing to Sade a victimological theory that he evidently could not formulate in contemporary terms, but on recognizing that fiction stages questions that would later be systematized by the discipline and gives them a depth that the abstract category, in isolation, does not possess.

This is perhaps one of the most productive aspects of the approximation between literature and criminology. Instead of providing closed answers, the novel simultaneously preserves elements that an excessively rigid analysis might separate: Justine is vulnerable and possesses agency; she learns from experience and remains bound to the education she received; she participates in some situations of risk without becoming responsible for the acts committed against her. Sade's representation of the female victim thus makes it possible to move beyond asking how much the victim contributed to what happened to her and toward a broader question: how does a person come repeatedly to occupy the position of victim, what possibilities of action were effectively available to her, and what structures contributed to defining those possibilities? It is at this point that Justine, rather than offering an anticipated answer to victimological theories, demonstrates what literature can add to their formulation.

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ChatGPT (GPT-5.6 Sol, OpenAI) was used only for English-language grammar checking. The manuscript's arguments, analysis, claims, and cited sources are the author's own and were not generated or substantively altered by the tool.

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